

The Spirituality of Arnold Janssen for Lay Partners

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1. Introduction

1.1 Arnold Janssen's Spirituality: General Remarks

Men and women who belong to the Arnoldus Family, that is to Saint Arnold Janssen's world-wide spiritual family, are expected to follow in their daily life the spirituality of Arnold Janssen. *What does that mean?*

The prologue of the Constitutions of the Society of the Divine Word (*Societas Verbi Divini* – SVD) emphasizes that our name “Society of the Divine Word” expresses our “special dedication to the Divine Word and his mission”. In this prologue we read “His life is our life, his mission our mission.” These words already tell us also something about Fr. Arnold's mission, ‘his mission’ was the mission of Jesus.

Arnold's missionary spirituality was “Jesus spirituality” – using a new word, a “Jesuan” spirituality (not Jesuit spirituality!!). Christian spirituality has to follow the Gospel of Jesus Christ. However, there are different ways of following Jesus. Arnold had his own way of doing it. When we consider letting our life be directed by the spirituality of Arnold, then we say: we follow Jesus, we live as disciples of Jesus in the footsteps of Arnold. In our discipleship of Jesus we let ourselves be inspired by the way Saint Arnold followed Jesus. *How exactly did Fr. Arnold follow Jesus? What was his special way of following Jesus?*

1.2 Arnold's Following Jesus as Inherited from his Parents

The roots of Arnold's spirituality we find first of all in his family, particularly in what he inherited from his parents. So we now ask: *How did Fr. Arnold from childhood on learn to follow Jesus? What did his parents give him for his spiritual growth?*

From his parents Arnold learned to follow Jesus **the incarnate word of God** – to follow the Divine Word which became a human being. Again and again his family in Goch prayed the prologue of St. John's gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us.” (Jn 1:1,14)

We, therefore, now can say that to follow Jesus in the way of Saint Arnold means: to follow Jesus as the Word of God which has become a human being (the incarnate Word of God). And that means for us in a very general sense and expressed with words of St. Arnold from the year 1904: “**In the contemplation of his holy life we should try to enter into the sanctuary of his heart, admire and adore the virtues and imitate them as far as we possibly can**”.¹ *What does that mean concretely for all the members of the Society and lay partners?*

One could find the answer to this question by reflecting on the Word: on our human Word and the Divine Word. First of all let us reflect on our human word and then, building on it, on the Divine Word in general, on following the Divine Word as an authentic Christian and finally we will see

¹ Cf. Arnold Janssen, “The Spirit and Task of Our Society”, in Peter McHugh, ed., *Arnold Janssen Yesterday and Today*, Analecta SVD – 63/III, p. 302.

how Fr. Arnold understood the expression “Divine Word” in the name “Society of the Divine Word”.

2. The Human Word

In reflecting on our human word, Jürgen Ommersborn follows the book *Theology of Revelation*.² The author of this book Rene Latourelle defines the human “Word” “as being the activity through which one person *addresses* and *expresses* himself to another person with a view towards *communication*.”³ Our human word is “primarily an *interpersonal* encounter.... Every word (conversation) is aimed at another human being”.⁴ He says, “To speak means to *address*” someone. “Every word is a call, a demand for a reaction. By its dynamic character, it tends to establish a circle of address and response, to become conversation, dialogue”.⁵ “If every word is a demand for reaction, this is because word tends towards *communication*, even if it does not always produce communication.”⁶ The goals of this communication can vary according to the purpose for which the word is being spoken. A word can give “information, orders, messages.” It is the word of the media or of doctors or scientists or leaders. It is the word of man or woman. “This utilitarian aspect” of the word “represents the lowest degree of human expression and intent. In this level the word is impersonal, outside the process of communication”.⁷

On a somewhat higher level words become the *expression* or revelation of a person. “To the extent that we express ourselves in our speaking, or that we put ourselves into our speaking, and in the measure that we truly communicate ourselves to someone else, or *see him in himself* as a person, our human word achieves its fullness of meaning. The authentic word is that of the person as such, in his individuality, expressing himself to another person, seeing him as a person too.... The word accomplishes its mission of conversation all the better according as man (and woman) (in the image of God who speaks of Himself in His Word) puts himself into his word, to communicate the profound meaning of his person. For communication and dialogue to become a reciprocal exchange, revelation, each party must have a respect for the other in his personal mystery, complete readiness to accept and give, mutual trust, a friendship existing or at least beginning.”⁸

Word in its higher essence, is thus the means through which two people “unveil themselves to each other with a view towards reciprocal exchange. When word attains this level, it is the sign of friendship and love; it is the welling up and expression of a freedom which opens to another person and thus *gives itself*. Speaking turns into a form of giving from one person to the other. Each opens to the other, offering him hospitality in everything that is best within himself. Each gives and gives himself in a communion of love”⁹. A beautiful example of this mutual giving of oneself in a communion of love is the marriage promise: “*I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love you and honor you all the days of my life.*”

3. The Divine Word

God himself addresses us, the living, all-powerful, thrice holy God. “He wants to be a *Me* addressing *You*, in an interpersonal and living relationship, with a view towards communication, dialogue, sharing”.¹⁰ The word of God does not only speak and inform people; it is not simply

² Rene Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, New York: Alba House Staten Isl., 1968.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 316-317.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 317.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 318.

spoken for utilitarian reasons. The word of God is rather “a word of friendship and love. The word of God is a Word of Love”¹¹ *What makes us say this?*

God shows in various ways that he wants his word to be a word of love; he first of all does it through the mere fact that he speaks his Word to us. Remember for a moment who God is and who we are; God who himself is uncreated addresses us who are his creatures. God exists from all eternity and for all eternity, without beginning or end. We, on the other hand, have a beginning in this world and our life will one day end in this world. God and we human beings are so different. Humanly speaking we must say: There is an infinite distance between us.

Perhaps we have lost the feeling for the greatness of God. We are so familiar with God as if he was our good buddy. God’s greatness is impressively expressed in the story of the prophet Isaiah’s calling to be a prophet.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.’

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: ‘Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!’ Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs.

The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: ‘Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.’ (Is 6:1-7)

This little story describes the huge distance between God and us. And this God bridges the infinite distance between man and God through His word and stands before man. In the letter to the Hebrews we read: “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son” (1:1-2) and that means through Jesus Christ. In that way the Most High, the Transcendent, makes himself a *God near at hand*, God with us, Emmanuel as we read in Matthew, the angel said to Joseph in a dream: “ ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel’, which means ‘God is with us’.” (1:23)

“This gesture, through which God comes out of his mystery, *condescends*, makes himself present to us, can only mean salvation and friendship for us. At the very root of the fact of this word, there is God’s gratuitous will to establish bonds of friendship with us human beings.” The reason for God speaking his Word to us is “to establish bonds of friendship and love with us and associate us in His own, divine life....”¹²

The intention of love in the divine word is even more obvious if the creature thus addressed and called, here below, to enter into a relation of friendship with God is an *enemy creature*, having turned away from God as we read in Genesis 3. God, in friendship and love, approaches a creature who has rebelled against him. What is more, he pushes his condescension to the point of assuming the very condition of his creature. God puts himself completely on a human level, to the point of being incarnate, meeting man and woman on his/her own level.¹³ The only reason for God doing

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid, pp. 318-319.

that is his love, as Jesus says in John: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” (3:16)

When God through his incarnate Word, through Jesus Christ, speaks to us, he does not just want to teach us some religious truths of the natural order, but he wants to reveal to us principally the secrets of his divine life: that he is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, that he is Trinity. Such a revelation of the mystery of his divine life God can only give to friends or to people whom he wants to be his friends. Through his word that has become one like us, God has gifted us “with an excess of love.”

Jesus’ mission was to be God’s love in person. Through the sacrifice of his life, he accomplishes the love which he was meant to be: he loves us to the end (Jn 13:1). “This is the completion of the mystery of the word as self-gift. The *articulated* word becomes the *immolated* word. Christ on the cross *tells* of the charity of the Father up to the last inarticulate cry in which everything is said and witnessed to.” After that there is only silence: “The word of God is exhausted to the point of silence. ‘The time of death and silence becomes the supreme expression of the love offered to humanity’. Everything which could not be expressed in words is expressed in the outstretched arms and the body drained of its blood, and in the heart pierced with the centurion’s lance (Jn 19:34). The Word of Love delivered Himself entirely to men.” “Revelation through the word is consummated and sealed by revelation – action”.¹⁴ This last action of Jesus, his death on the cross, speaks louder than every other word he had spoken before his death. St. Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans: “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” (5:8)

These thoughts of Latourelle we find expressed in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation of Vatican II. There we read: “It pleased God in his goodness and wisdom, to reveal himself and to make known the mystery of his will... His will was that men should have access to the Father, through Christ, the Word made flesh, in the Holy Spirit, and thus become sharers in the divine nature.... By this revelation, then, the invisible God... from the fullness of his love, addresses men as his friends and moves among them... in order to invite and receive them into his own company.” (DV 2)

4. Becoming the Incarnate Divine Word

Since the prologue of the Gospel according to John had a formative importance for Fr. Arnold from childhood on and remained important for him throughout his life, we now look at what it means to follow Jesus, the incarnate Divine Word in the light of this prologue. Or we can also say: Following Jesus the incarnate Divine Word, being / becoming a lay missionary or mission partner of the incarnate Divine Word according to the prologue of St. John’s gospel.

4.1 In Jn 1:3 we read, “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” *What does that mean for us in our relation to other people and to the whole or creation?*

4.1.1 In Relation to Other People

For all of us who in fellowship with Saint Arnold Janssen as members of the Society of the Divine Word or as lay partners commit ourselves to imitating the Divine Word in our lives it means: we see in every human being with his / her culture and religion a man, a woman, a child who is created in the image of God.

4.1.2 In Relation to the Whole of Creation

Not only us human beings but every being, every creature is created in love by the Divine Word. Therefore we say together with St. Arnold: “God’s all merciful goodness and power embraces even

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 319-320.

the smallest and the least important creature.” As members of the Arnoldus Family all of us, therefore, should have a deep respect for each creature.

4.1.3 Creation is the Word of God – Signing the Earth Charter

The whole of creation has been created by the Word of God; that means, creation is the Word of God; through creation God speaks to us. This thought leads us to an interesting and important event in our modern SVD history: “The SVD Generalate together with VIVAT International signed the Earth Charter.”¹⁵ That charter had been presented to the world in the year 2000 in the peace palace in The Hague (Netherlands).

The origin of the Earth Charter is stated in the following manner, “In 1987 the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development issued a call for the creation of a new charter that would set forth fundamental principles for sustainable development. The drafting of an Earth Charter was part of the unfinished business of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. In 1994 Maurice Strong, the Secretary General of the Earth Summit and Chairman of the Earth Council, and Mikhail Gorbachev, President of the Green Cross International, launched a new Earth Charter Initiative with support from the Dutch government. An Earth Charter Commission was formed in 1997 to oversee the project and Earth Charter Secretariat was established at the Earth Council in Costa Rica....A new phase in the Initiative began with the official launching of the Earth Charter at the Peace Palace in The Hague”.¹⁶

The Preamble of the Earth Charter states: “We stand at a critical moment in Earth’s history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of the Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations...The protection of Earth’s vitality, diversity and beauty is a sacred trust.”

The preamble continues: “The choice is ours: form a global partnership to care for Earth and one another or risk the destruction of ourselves and the diversity of life. Fundamental changes are needed in our values, institutions, and ways of living. We must realize that when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more. We have the knowledge and technology to provide for all and to reduce our impacts on the environment. The emergence of a global civil society is creating new opportunities to build a democratic and humane world. Our environmental, economic, political, social and spiritual challenges are interconnected, and together we can forge inclusive solutions.

To realize these aspirations, we must decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying ourselves with the whole Earth community as well as our local communities. We are at once citizens of different nations and of one world in which the local and global are linked. Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world. The spirit of human solidarity and kinship with all life is strengthened when we live with reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature.

¹⁵ *Arnoldus Nota*, August – September 2002, p. 3.

¹⁶ <http://www.earthcharter.org/innerpg.cfm?id-menu=20>, p. 1. (accessed on 11.11.03)

We urgently need a shared vision of the basic values to provide an ethical foundation for the emerging world community...¹⁷

As already mentioned, the SVD Generalate together with VIVAT International signed and in that way endorsed the Earth Charter on behalf of the SVD. Antony Pernia, then Superior General, writes about our relationship with the Earth Charter: “For us in the Society of the Divine Word the concern for the earth does not only mean that we are concerned about the survival of the earth, but we also care about our own spirituality and mission. To care for our earth means: creation remains the Word of God through which God speaks to us and which remains the guarantee of life for the whole of humanity.”¹⁸ Then, he quotes these words from the prologue of John’s Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people” (Jn 1:1-4).

4.2 We read in Jn 1:14, “The Word became flesh and lived among us”. These words point out two main aspects:

4.2.1 The Incarnate Word of God: Consequences of the Divine Word’s incarnation for the relation of people to one another.

The Divine Word became a human being in Jesus of Nazareth. In that way the Divine Word has connected himself with every human being and through his life, suffering, death and resurrection he redeemed every human being; in that way he gives to every human being the character of a son and daughter of God, regardless if this person knows of it or not.

Members of the Society of the Divine Word must not only have respect for their fellow human beings but because of the Word’s incarnation they should know themselves to be **connected** with every human being in the world and see in each man and woman a brother and sister, and, like John Paul II did, also call them “brothers and sisters in the other religions” when they talk or think about them.

4.2.2 The Inculturated Word of God: Consequences of the Divine Word’s inculturation for the appreciation of cultures.

Jesus did not only become a human being, but human in a special way, he became a human being within a particular culture, the Jewish culture that is. When God became a human being he became a human being with a particular language and culture. In Jesus God became a Jew. And Jesus was rooted in his Jewish culture and religion. In becoming human God did not become a culture-less being; God does not value us as neutral, culture-less beings, but as human beings with their own particular culture.

Since the Divine Word became a human being with his own, Jewish culture, all of us who want to follow Jesus the incarnate Divine Word in our life should be filled with a deep appreciation of all cultures. That does not mean that we affirm every aspect of a culture uncritically which has developed over thousands of years; Jesus did not do that either. Cultures change and Jesus wanted to liberate his Jewish culture from all that was bad or not good.

What do these thoughts about Jesus being the inculturated Word of God mean for us who have committed ourselves to following the inculturated Divine Word? *Couldn’t it be our special vocation to be bridges between people of different cultures? Couldn’t it be our mission to contribute*

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ *Arnoldus Nota*, August - September 2002, p. 2.

*towards culturally diverse people living in reconciled and mutually appreciating cultural diversity?
If yes, how could we carry out this mission?*

5. Arnold's Understanding of the Divine Word

In the first printed SVD rule of 1891 we read: In the expression "Divine Word" in the name of the Society, we understand in a threefold way. The Divine Word is:

- The Word of the Father, which is the Son
- The Word of the Son who has become a human being and that is the gospel of Jesus Christ
- The Word of the Holy Spirit which is all of scripture, the word of the prophets, apostles and priests insofar as they are spoken under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Saint Arnold saw the Divine Word in relation to the Triune God.

Like Arnold, we follow Jesus the Divine Word which has become a human being. Following him we also follow the other two persons of the Blessed Trinity. Jesus points us to the Father: he makes us pray to God: "Our Father." And Jesus the incarnate Word of God also points to the Holy Spirit. He promised to send the Spirit: "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you" (Jn 16:12-15). Being missionaries of the Divine Word who has become a human being, we are directed by him to the Triune God. The Triune God is one because he is LOVE.

The Divine Word became a human being in the form of a little baby. And Fr. Arnold said about this baby: The Christ-child is **the gift of the merciful love of the Triune God**. Being with St. Arnold, missionaries both religious and lay partners of the Divine Word, having become a human being, we are ultimately missionaries of the God who is Love. Pope Francis said: Jesus – the one who is the Divine Word having become human – is **the face of the Father's mercy**. Being missionaries with Saint Arnold who follow Jesus, the Divine Word having become human, we are missionaries of this visible merciful love of the Triune God; we are to be today what Jesus was at his time when he lived on earth: the face of the Triune God's merciful love.

Love has many faces; in the present year of mercy it has for instance the face of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. Pope Francis wrote proclaiming the Year of Mercy: "It is my burning desire that, during this Jubilee, the Christian people may reflect on the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. ... Let us rediscover these corporal works of mercy: to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, heal the sick, visit the imprisoned, and bury the dead. And let us not forget the spiritual works of mercy: to counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish sinners, comfort the afflicted, forgive offences, bear patiently those who do us ill, and pray for the living and the dead." (n. 15)

Fr. Arnold wrote under the heading "The Spirit and Task of Our Society" the following: "The spiritual and corporal works of mercy will receive our special attention, since the Lord has especially recommended them to us. People are images of God, brothers and sisters of Christ, and temples of the Holy Spirit. Just as God cares for them out of the fullness of his love, endures their defects, and seeks to reform them, so we, too, will love them actively. This will be our golden rule, whether we spread the faith or foster fraternal love. In practicing these works of charity we will not forget our deceased, especially those who are recommended to our prayers."¹⁹

¹⁹ Arnold Janssen, *The Spirit and task of our Society*, p. 304.

As lay partners we ask: *what could be our spiritual and corporal works of mercy for people who feel or are marginalised/abandoned in society, like the elderly, sick / terminally ill, the handicapped, single parents, street children, refugees etc.? How can we cooperate in this with all the other members of our Arnoldus family?*

Conclusion

We are lay women and men committed to letting ourselves be guided in our lives by St. Arnold Janssen. In communion with the vowed members of the Society of the Divine Word and all the members of the Arnoldus Family, we make our own his spirituality of following Jesus the Divine Word who has become a human being, of listening through personal, family or group Bible reading to the Divine Word which is the word of the Holy Spirit in Scripture. Opening our hearts to receiving his word and being filled with his love, we are ready to take up his mission in our world. This world is vastly ruled by cruel, exploitative mercilessness; the loving, compassionate and merciful God seems to be absent from it. We now feel called and sent by God, in communion with the vowed members of the Society of the Divine Word and the whole Arnoldus Family, to imitate Jesus, the incarnate Divine Word, and **BE**, like him in the power of the Holy Spirit the gift of the Triune God's love for this world and in this world, so that where we are the Triune God is visibly present.

With St. Arnold we let the missionary motto of our life be: *“May the darkness of sin and the night of unbelief vanish before the light of the Word and the Spirit of grace. And may the heart of Jesus live in the hearts of all people.”*